

## Level One - Grades 4-6 - First Place Winner - 2021 - Indiana

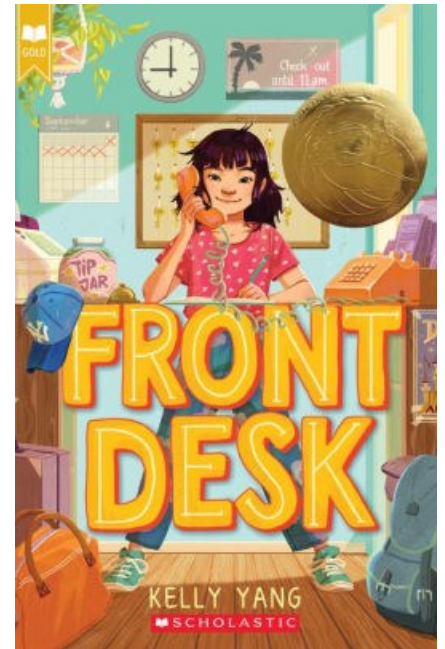
Noelle C.  
Evansville, Indiana

Dear Kelly Yang,

I just want to take a moment to thank you for writing such a beautiful, inspiring, and life changing book. I am an avid reader, and I love reading books that relate to real word issues. When I read **Front Desk**, I knew it was my new favorite book. The parts that resonated with me the most were the messages that you should not judge a person by the color of their skin and that our world is filled with many injustices needing to be addressed. Many world changers have said this before, but sadly it is still a problem in our world.

In **Front Desk**, Hank, an African American man, is accused of stealing a car by the hotel owner, Mr. Yao, based on the idea that he is black and could be a "bad guy." Not only did I think that was unfair, I could not believe that he would jump to that conclusion just based on the color of someone's skin. I most connected with Mia because she treats everyone with respect, kindness, and an appreciation for who they are regardless of what they look like. These attitudes of Mr. Yao are what's holding back America today. We need more "Mias" in the world. Thank you for bringing up this issue in a way that is personal to kids like me.

Mia Tang and her family went to America to have a better life, but when they arrived it wasn't anything like what they expected. Her family worked for very little money and willingly did so to hopefully get the "American Dream." They worked for a boss that repeatedly made them feel meaningless and replaceable. This brings to light another imbalance in our communities. People of color are sometimes forced to take any job available, and sometimes for very little pay, to survive. Immigrant families like Mia's look for a fresh start but sometimes don't get what they imagined. Our world needs to be better, know better, and do better.



As I mentioned before, this is my new favorite book. This book was unlike any other book that I've read before. All kids should read this book, and teachers should be grabbing it off their shelves to share with their students. The messages of equality, bullying, acceptance, and opportunity are really powerful and have the ability to change the way people think about the world. This is what we need now. We are the future, and children need to hear your message, so they will make a world that is the "American Dream."

Thank you for changing my life and creating a better understanding of what's happening in our world today inside me.

Sincerely,  
Noelle C.

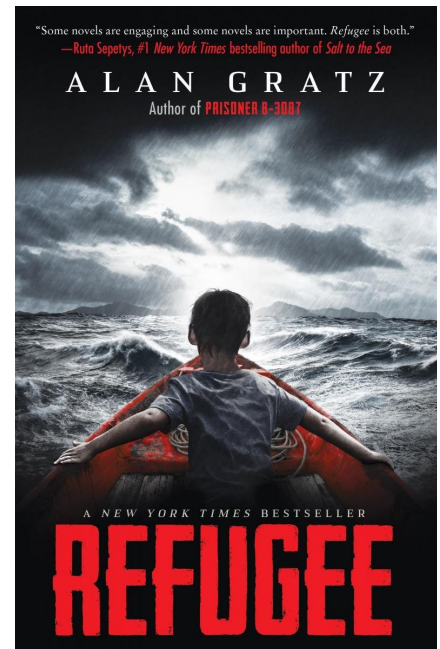
## Level Two - Grades 7-8 - First Place Winner - 2021 - Indiana

Melani B.  
Jasper, Indiana

Dear Alan Gratz,

I came to this country without anything, only looking for reassurance and a purpose, and this book gave me exactly that. Hot. Sweaty. Disoriented. I was only five years old feeling all these emotions in a country I was so foreign in. I didn't know when to run or when to walk or even when I was allowed to speak. This feeling, I thought, couldn't have been described better than it was in the book *Refugee* by Alan Gratz. You made a character that was named Isabel and she was a Cuban girl who was escaping from her mother country, Cuba, because of the riots and communism.

It was 2010 when my dad decided that we, as a family, could not live in Cuba. Cuba, during that time, was full of madness. It's a communistic country, of course. There was barely any food and people were mad at the horrendous government they had. I, as a 4-year-old girl, had barely any food and protein to keep me healthy. The mosquitoes of the Caribbean ate me up and I was ill frequently. We had to flee. My dad had decided to come first and then we, my mother and I, would come around a year later. We decided on this because it was better for me and my mom to come to America with my dad already knowing the environment there and having a stable job. So, he went. He had gone through many dangers of the unknown countries he went through. He was jailed many times in countries he did not know and was deported back to Cuba a couple of times. He couldn't take the water route, so he had to go through the land which was different than Isabel, who went through water. My father had gone through eight different countries until he could stop at the Mexican border and obtain his paperwork and residential papers. Isabel went through many obstacles and precarious events to get to the country we now call home. I thought that I could never relate to someone like this, but this book made me realize how many more others there are like me.



My family knew that I would have nothing and be nothing while living and growing up in Cuba. To put this into your perspective, imagine being one of the smartest students in your class, but having the same job as the lowest-scoring student. That's what Cuba was and my parents knew that I deserved better than that. In the book, Isabel's family realized that that country was not good for their well-being or their possible futures. Now, Isabel did go through the tough waters, but we decided to go through land. Mexico. The trip was rough and harsh with barely any food and water. We couldn't wear any jewelry or else we could've gotten killed because of it. At this point, my dad had already gotten to America and we came after. It was just my mom and me, which was terrifying.

Isabel was such a strong person to endure the rough waters and to have to flee a country she basically grew up in. Isabel was older than me in the book. I was only five when we decided to flee. When I first reached American soil, I thought I was the only person in the world who I could relate to and I thought that was that until I read this book in the 7th grade. It opened my mind and made me realize that I wasn't alone in this situation. This book and especially this character made me understand that fleeing a country that only wants the worst for you isn't a feeling you have to have alone.

I was an immigrant, a foreigner to a country that I had no idea the language or its system. I was made fun of constantly when I didn't know certain words or phrases, but then I started to get the hang of it. I am now 14 years old and I cannot imagine never coming to this country that I and many immigrants call home. Isabel and her journey was the first time that I didn't feel alone in a long time. We would discuss this in class and many students would listen to my family's journey and how I felt personally connected to Isabel and her many obstacles. Alan Gratz, I want to personally thank you for having this character whose story made me feel stronger and more connected to my roots and the way I came to be the person that I am today.

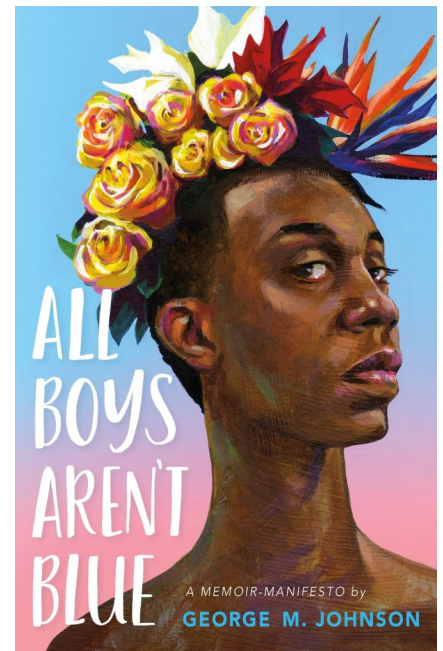
In deep appreciation,  
Melani B.

## Level Three - Grades 9-12 - First Place Winner - 2021 - Indiana

Badreddine B.  
Valparaiso, Indiana

Dear George M. Johnson,

"My second identity-queer is a journey that I will be on until the day I die, and I honestly believe that. Every day I learn something about myself." In view of your quote, I began to witness snippets of myself that I did not know before. It was not until I gathered ***All Boys Aren't Blue*** off my public library's bookshelves that I became knowledgeable and aware of my individuality and differences. It was not until I sat sobbing on my couch that I recognized all these identities that made up who I am. I never had the concept of believing that I was truly lost, yet when I turned the last page of ***All Boys Aren't Blue***, my sense of direction was ruined. I was lost and was waiting for someone to find me. In your upbringing in a black community and realization of your LGBTQ+ characteristics, I found myself. It was a version of myself that society deemed unforgivable, crude, and unacceptable. It was a version that I suppressed until I had no remembrance of ever being part of the LGBTQ+ community.



Identity has meant a lot to me in my life. Growing up as the only Moroccan and Muslim in my grade level, and being conscious of the cultural level of importance it held, is a difficult experience. And with the addition of being culturally different from others, my queerness was a difficult part for me to comprehend. In the first act of ***All Boys Aren't Blue***, your unique storytelling of struggling to find a way to express yourself allowed me to realize that many LGBTQ+ members struggle with the same ordeal. Many, like myself, are taught that there are only two genders and one sexuality. However, there are a plethora of unique orientations. On page 23 of ***All Boys Aren't Blue***, you state, "However, I was old enough to know that I would find safety only in the arms of suppression-hiding my true self-because let's face it, kids can be cruel." Millions in the non-heterosexual orientation continue to suppress themselves, and I beg to question, why must we? Why must we shape our own identity to fit society's understanding of what it means to be queer or identify as a different orientation other than heterosexuality? I shall not be shaping my own identity for society's benefit in the future.

On the next page, you also state, "I became a world-class actor by the age of five, able to blend in with the boys and girls without ever questioning my effeminate nature." Continuously going to school and compelling myself to act and restrain myself forced my mentality to change. I developed a persona that I would use daily to anyone and everyone around me. I was unaware that I had a choice in whether I could truly be myself until I realized people go through hardships that I can't imagine. Anybody can act well, but it takes a certain amount of courage and willpower to confidently pose as one's true self. I think back to my school persona, and I pity the child who constantly had to smile and quell his queerness. Yet, now I can become my own person.

Despite my strugglings to repress my true self, I was always seen and continue to be seen as a Muslim. I see myself as a Muslim, first and foremost. My Muslim identity is in the way I talk, the way I act, and even the way I cultivated certain ethical pathways. Yet, even in my own community, I am observed as an unnaturally flamboyant man. This too, resulted in a persona I reserved for my family, and the Muslim community. Despite this, after reading your chapter titled, "Losing Hope" I became fearful of the idea of losing a family member without showing myself, entitled to a facade that others would view as my genuine self. In a way, the loss of your beloved cousin, Hope, has inspired thousands of people to regain their hope. You have allowed me to regain mine, the hope of one day being able to show my family and my community, what lies beneath their son's mask.

Your book has become a shining beacon of empowerment, Mr. Johnson. Your stories, written in a tone that leaves you wanting more, yet contempt with chapters ending on such happy notes has inspired me to open my true appearance to others. I will not sit by and watch my life slip through my fingers like countless have before me. No, I will continue to strive to, "Be Bold and Brave and Queer."

Sincerely,  
Badreddine B.

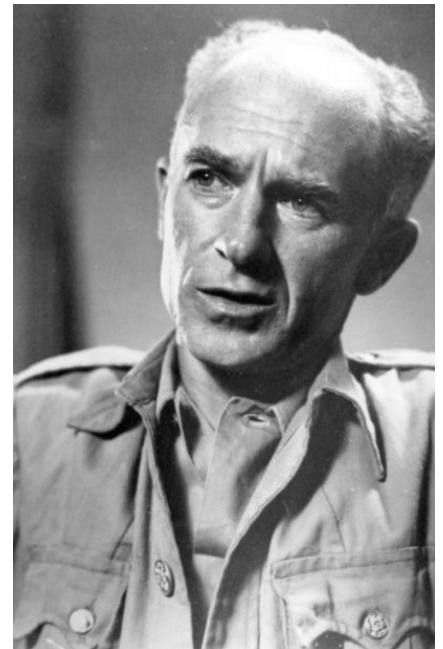


## Indiana Author Letter Prize - 2021

Jack E.  
Michigan City

Dear Ernie Pyle,

Yesterday I was sitting in my kitchen talking to my dad about a school assignment that I was complaining about completing. My dad asked what the assignment was about? I explained to my dad that I had to write an essay concerning a book, poem, paper, or speech and write to the author about how the piece of literature affected me and my view on the world. Of course, my dad had the bright idea of writing about an author from Indiana. Needless to say, I wasn't very thrilled because I had already started the assignment concerning another author. For the time being I let my father have his way while we looked up famous authors from Indiana. As we scrolled through the many photos of famous authors from Indiana on the internet, we came along to discover your name on the list. My dad recognized your name amongst all the other authors. My dad said that you were a war correspondent during WWII. He thought it would be a good idea to learn a little about you and your writings that made you famous enough to stand out on the list. I have to admit that neither me or my father had ever had the opportunity to read any of your writing. So we looked up your most famous article.



What came up on the internet was the story **"The Death of Captain Waskow."** The National Society of Newspaper Columnist selected this passage as "the best American newspaper column of all time." After reading this, my father and I felt compelled to read the passage.

Of course, Mr. Pyle, I will not go into depth, concerning your story of how Captain Waskow's body was carried by mule down the moonlit trail four days after his death from combat in Italy, on January 10, 1944. For I would like others to read it for themselves. However, I would like to thank you for the telling of Captain Waskow's life and the meaning of his death to those he led into combat. I know it took great courage to write his story because you were willing to risk your life in order to tell it. It was beautifully

written. It brought tears to my dad's eyes as he read the story to me. My dad stated that "this was why people choose to be writers. It is to bring to life what it is to be human and how to love your fellow man."

As in your day, today we are also combating difficult times due to a pandemic called COVID-19. By describing Captain Waskow's life and sacrifice so beautifully, you also brought to life all the other men and women who died for the freedom we enjoy today. I am not so sure that the society in which I live today is as willing to sacrifice for others as your generation was so willing to do in your time. Unfortunately, today our society is not even willing to wear a mask to protect others from COVID-19, let alone be willing to be placed on the front lines of a war in order to protect their freedoms. It is with great sadness that I report to you today that many people are unwilling to wear a mask to protect others from the possibility of dying from COVID-19. I find it sad that so many people today are unwilling to endure an inconvenience of wearing a mask compared to your generation's willingness to sacrifice your life for humanity.

In the end I would like to thank you for your beautiful writing and your ultimate sacrifice you gave towards our country and that of being a journalist. It was extremely special that I got to experience your writing with my father. I also look forward to sharing your story to anyone who has not heard it.

Sincerely, with a debt of gratitude,  
Jack E.